

## Savor the Moment by PennyDeadfall

**Category:** IT

**Genre:** Drama, Horror

**Language:** English

**Status:** In-Progress

**Published:** 2017-10-18 11:28:50

**Updated:** 2017-10-29 18:57:48

**Packaged:** 2019-12-12 04:54:24

**Rating:** M

**Chapters:** 3

**Words:** 14,582

**Publisher:** [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

**Summary:** Fear was a flavor. Phobia, a marinade. But trauma was a delicacy. Trauma left behind a special Taste. It took one rainy evening to stir up forgotten memories in the young librarian's mind. Something was lurking just out of sight, something that brought a sting of dread to her skin and a cold weight to her stomach. What had she seen? What had seen her...? Pennywise/OC (kiiinda)

# 1. Julie Takes the Long Way Home

Hello all! Looks like we're in the same weird-as-hell boat, aren't we? Honestly didn't think I'd be here, with the hots for a murderous cosmic clown... What is my life? Well, embracing it helps (not *embracing It*, I don't trust him that much...) and I hoped that getting this idea out of my system would be good. Maybe you'll dig it too. Look at me, trying to emulate King's writing XD That being said, some of this will deviate from the 2017 film and incorporate scenes from the book.

Anyway, the main character is inspired by a person from the books but she's only mentioned once in passing. I've decided to give her a personality/ history/ first name lol/ and an unfortunate story with our dear, Pennywise. Let me know your thoughts :]

*Summary: Fear was a flavor. Phobia, a marinade. But trauma was a delicacy. Trauma left behind a special Taste.*

*It took one rainy evening to stir up forgotten memories in the young librarian's mind. Something was lurking just out of sight, something that brought a sting of dread to her skin and a cold weight to her stomach. What had she seen? What had seen her? And why now, of all times, did she feel like it was closing in?*

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## Savor the Moment

### Chapter One

#### Julie Takes the Long Way Home

1

Julie Davies hung back in the glass corridor connecting the Children's Library to the Old Building, watching the rain continue to patter against the glass. The normally warm walkway was chilled, thanks to the storm that decided to take residence in Derry for the past week or so. She rubbed her arms, her plastic parka crinkling at her touch. A frown pulled at her lips, not that she was aware, but the flood had

been bothering her ever since the weathermen had warned of it. She liked the rain, could enjoy it smattering her umbrella on her walks to and from work in Derry Library. But too much of it... enough to clog the gutters and make people slosh through the streets and sidewalks made her uneasy. Brought back things she'd wished to forget. Too much rain was dangerous. Too easy to slip, to slide, to

She stood there with her rain boots on and her practical work shoes dangling in one hand, having just changed them. It'd be pointless to attempt to go out in anything but rubber or plastic. She'd be soaked to the bones and come down with a cold, her luck, and that wouldn't do. Not when she was the Reading Lady and prided herself on managing very convincing voices for her stories. It simply wouldn't work if the princesses and fairies and little heroes sounded just as raspy and old like the frogs and dragons and monst

"Not waiting for me, are you?"

Julie jumped and turned to see Mrs. Starrett, the head librarian, locking the doors to the Children's section behind her. She smiled at the older woman. "Not entirely, Barbara," she said. "I honestly don't know what's holding me back."

Mrs. Starrett looked at the rainstorm outside and pulled a face that said *yikes*. "Hardly inviting, isn't it? It's all cats and dogs out there. Not as bad as last year though."

Julie shrugged and almost shook her head. That wasn't it. "No, I suppose not... Hopefully it won't flood *that* badly anyway. They've said another few days of rain on the news."

"Trust the weathermen to tell you wrong."

Julie smiled. "I hope."

"Well, let's get a move on, shall we?" Mrs. Starrett said brightly. "The rain isn't going to stop for us anytime soon, and I'd like to get home in time for *Jeopardy*."

"Not to mention the curfew."

"Oh, yes, of course." Her voice was suddenly solemn. The curfew

wasn't to be taken lightly, what with all the missing persons reports. There were too many to be coincidental, to be all runaways, to be gone without a trace.

The pair came to the main entrance and got their umbrellas ready and rainhoods up. Mrs. Starrett cracked the door slightly, the sound of rain intensifying. She hesitated and Julia thought at first that she was reluctant to step into the deluge. She wouldn't blame her. Mrs. Starrett turned back to her. "Will you be alright on your own?"

Julia's brows rose. "I *have* been for the past few years," she smiled.

Mrs. Starrett remained serious. "I'm not trying to mother you," she said defensively. "I just worry. It's gotten dark and with what the police have warned us of... disappearances... and you're a young woman. A *pretty* young woman."

"Oh, Barbara!" Julia laughed, shaking her head.

"I just worry, that's all!"

"Well, don't. Not about me."

"If you wait a moment, I could see if Caleb is still here," Mrs. Starrett suggested. Caleb was the head maintenance man. Middle aged, always cheerful. Had quite a scare the last month when his daughter hadn't come home from school on time. Fortunately, she'd only gone over a friend's house without phoning. Julie never saw him cry before that. "He doesn't live far from you. I'm sure he wouldn't mind walking you home."

"*Thank you* for the concern, Barbara," Julie said patiently. "But I'll be fine on my own. If I run into any strange character's, I have Mr. Hemmingway to protect me." She pulled a thick hardback book from her purse, smiling.

Mrs. Starrett laughed, "Well, I see you're in good hands then... Good night."

"See you tomorrow."

Once outside, taking cover from the wind and rain, Julie felt the

world grow louder and crisper. She squinted into the storm, the heavy pattering of raindrops filling her thoughts. While Mrs. Starrett's figure disappeared around the side of the building, Julie didn't move. It was as if she were waiting for something. Waiting for herself to do something. She glanced down Costello Ave, her usual route home, and on a strange urge, decided not to take it. Despite the uneasiness of the absent sun. Despite the rain trying to shred her parka. Despite her mounting exhaustion from the day. Despite the lack of reason for the decision. She continued straight, walking the sidewalk that ran along the park and canal.

And while Julie was still thinking over her sudden change in direction, she felt with a certainty that once she'd passed her usual turn, there was no bother turning back.

It was only a small detour. Wouldn't put her out of the way no more than ten, fifteen minutes. No harm done.

*Except for the rain and the puddles and the wind helping the rain.*

She was annoyed at her decision now, or more so how the street sloped downwards which made turning back uphill a struggle on the rain slicked road. She'd have to keep going. No harm done.

2

She paused as she walked the path that ran beside Bassey Park, her eyes settling on the bridge. The Kissing Bridge. Now the flooded Kenduskeag ran under it, washing away anything that were to fall into its path. Washed away. Why was it washed? Swept away, carried away, but why washed? The branches, trash, windblown objects, poor little animals that couldn't get away weren't washed by the river, were they? In water, yes, but, washed? It was too kind a word.

Worn was the word. Eroded was the word. Battered. Stripped. Drowned.

*Drowned.*

Not washed.

Julie Davies stared at the bridge from the sidewalk. Unmoving. She

wanted to move, to go towards it, stand on it, despite knowing better. The Kissing Bridge was never a good place to be, least of all in the pouring rain when the boards would be slick, least of all when the clouds made it seem like night was a few ticks away. But Julie stood rooted to the sidewalk, her eyes fixed on the graffiti-covered bridge. She turned fully towards it, one foot resting on its toes as if she meant to take a step, and then quickly came to her senses and her heel touched cement.

The curfew.

She sighed, meaning it to sound like relief but it didn't. She forced herself to smile and shake her head. How silly of her, what was she thinking. Clearly, I've had too long a day, she thought, wanting to say it aloud but not having the courage to talk to herself in public, even if alone. How silly.

Julie continued down the block, attempting to shake the unnerving feeling growing on her. She cast looks back to the bridge, as if expecting something. An answer? A question? Even after turning onto Kansas St. and the bridge far out of sight, she glanced over her shoulder. As if the bridge would be right behind her no matter how far from the park she went.

And it was. In feeling. She looked back and felt the bridge, its image tickling the sleeping parts of her mind. Like searching for a term when doing a crossword. Or waking up from a dream that's slipping away.

Drowned.

No, that wasn't it anymore. It wasn't a word. It wasn't that simple. It was a feeling, almost nostalgic but... not. *Not* because it didn't sit right with her. Intuition, perhaps? Like meeting someone new but knowing better than to let your guard down. The bridge isn't someone, she reminded herself.

"Well, no," she let slip out, not noticing. Places weren't people but they were *almost*. Places shared memories and feelings and while they couldn't speak, they did have much to tell. If you knew how to listen.

But the bridge hadn't any significance to her, aside from being a place to avoid. Then why did she look at it like an old acquaintance? Like a nasty ex. Why did she still feel it looming behind her as she came up to the old covered bridge at the bottom of the sloped Kansas street.

Now see, *this* bridge gave her no severe reactions. Under the wooden cover, the rain sounded farther away and she could hear herself think louder. This was only a bridge, part of the town, nothing terribly special or nefarious. Was that it? *It wasn't it.* The reputation of the Kissing Bridge and how young folk would often be caught fighting or vandalizing it? *No, it wasn't it.*

From under the protection of the bridge's roof, the rain resumed pattering heavily on the hood of her parka. Almost home, she thought, turning onto West Broadway. The fourth house from the block was hers now. But even as she drew nearer to home, her mind stayed behind, standing on the sidewalk, staring at the Kissing bridge in the rain.

She was still there...

Even with eyes open, she could see the Kissing Bridge clearly, see herself on it, in the heavy rain. Just like this evening. Only she hadn't been on the bridge before. Had she?

Then she began to remember, like a scab starting to itch after weeks of inactivity, begging to be ripped off, to expose the pink unhealed wound. It hurt to remember. It made her head pound even before full thoughts could form, the memory just bobbed at the surface of her mind, bringing back the *itch itch itch* and the rush of panic and pain. She wanted to keep it forgotten but the *itch itch itch* begged for scratching. It wasn't going away until it was scratched raw again. *Itch itch itch.* It wasn't going away, no matter how much she shook her head to clear it, if she sat down to calm the dizziness fogging in, the *itch itch itch* was unceasing. Julie braced herself on a lamppost, spotlighted on the dark street. Just as she thought she would collapse from the stream of memory, so close to her home, it sprang up to the forefront of her mind. Her eyes widened, the *itch itch itch* settling to a dull throb.

How could she have forgotten...? Something so...

As the memory began to solidify, she knew why it would have been repressed, something so awful. *Disturbing*. Even now, after searching for it, she wanted it gone.

It wasn't going away.

It

3

was a fall day, almost a year ago. *How many months had it been?* She'd have to know how many if it were that important. *It was so long ago though.* Or felt like it. *Seven or eight?* It was during the horrible flood. Worse than now but it felt the same to her. She hated when the Kenduskeag flooded and the rain wouldn't stop.

It was such a low time for her then. And the timing! It was like she was reliving it all over again. So low, so low. Worse than she'd ever been in her whole adult life. It was the first time in a long time that she couldn't distract herself with work, since the flooding made the library-goers, children especially, scarce, and Mrs. Starrett, bless her, kept sending her home early as a nice gesture. But Julie hated being alone. With only herself and her empty home.

It was such a low time for her.

The six years she had lived in Derry, she hadn't gotten incredibly close to anyone. She was friendly and had gone to a few of the local festivals and events but. Well, Julie had trouble opening up and talking about herself when the point of moving was to get a fresh start, to start over, and forget about the things that she left behind. *That left her behind.*

The Kissing Bridge had been deserted. She'd waited for the rowdy teenagers to leave and finally she wandered onto it. Her modest one inch heels stepped carefully to not draw attention. She wanted now to be alone, in her private moment. Her last

It was a very low time for her. She didn't want to think. Didn't want to remember.



But how *could* she forget it? Did she block it out to prevent another reoccurrence or

That wasn't it. It wasn't the bridge itself. It was what had happened there. What had almost happened.

*And why she stopped.*

Was stopped.

*By what? Who?*

What.

Regret fluttered in her chest. She'd been given the chance to rethink her actions although now... it wasn't... it wasn't what she did (almost did) that filled her with dread but something else that had occurred.

Something.

An image rose up before her mind. Rose up. And hovered. Red.

She'd been so careful in lifting one leg then the other over the railing of the Kissing Bridge, holding onto it for dear life despite her intentions meaning the opposite. The rain made her so heavy. Her parka hood had fallen, drenching her hair before she could right it. There was no point. Rain in her eyes, clinging to lashes like tears. Cold tears. There was no point.

Julie slowly pivoted, her back to the bridge, and faced the engorged Kenduskeag beneath her. The sight made her sick. So numb. *Why like this?* Why did it have to be like *this*? Is there any other way?

This was how it was supposed to be.

*Like it should have been before.*

Oh, the thought made her gag. The truth of it all. This was always it.

Her heels dug into the narrow ledge like anchors, her toes scarily touching air. She could hear the river rushing but couldn't see it well. The darkness made it less horrifying and she was thankful. *Three*

*times tis said the sinking man/ Comes up to face the skies.* Julie cracked a miserable smile at her own mind, conjuring up morbidly relevant Emily Dickinson lines. Of course. Even now, her authors were with her. When she needed them. Maybe if she stayed here long enough, and thought of enough encouraging poems, she could wait out the night and let cowardice take her home.

The wind blew back her hair and she turned her face upwards. She made sure of the wood grain beneath her cold fingers. Her grip was numb but sure. The dark clouds on the dark sky rushed past overheard. This was the last she'd see until she went under. Be quick. At least it isn't daylight. And you didn't have to see. *Let go.* Be quick.

"Psst."

Her head snapped back down, looking around frantically.

*No. No one can see. Not like this. She needed to be alone.*

She saw no one around. Had it been the wind whistling? She couldn't see anyone. It was her nervousness, her imagina

"Psst! Bookworm!"

Someone touched the back of her head and she yelped, trying to duck away from the contact. With a start, she saw that it was a *something*, not someone. A balloon. A red balloon that hadn't been there when she came. It was tied to the rail she was holding onto, directly behind her. *Someone had been here.* The voice she'd heard was real then. And so close. *But why?* Why would they leave a balloon? Julie scanned the area again, afraid. *They couldn't be far. They must be hiding.* But why?

The balloon's string was knotted in a simple bow, inches from her fingers. *Someone had been right here! Someone was right here!*

*Where?*

*Why?*

Fingers were numb. Julie wrapped her arm around the wooden rail for added security, now more worried about a spectator than what she had been about to do. And as she leaned over, some of the

markings on the rail caught her attention. While the bridge was carved up and vandalized beyond the point of repair, this particular etching stood out. Bright raw wood flashed in the grooves of the letters. This was a new addition. It was fresh.

*"I can't move my legs, darling, you have to"*

Julie felt the icy wind creep into her veins. That line she recognized. But. How. How would anyone know...?

Had it been there before? *It must have been.* She'd only been hanging onto that bridge no more than a few minutes. *Had it been longer?* It was hard enough to think someone had crept behind her and strung a balloon but to carve those words

*Those words*

Who else could know those words?

Terror beyond the fright of death shook her. Clinging to the rainy bridge, she searched for ghosts lurking in the park, watching with their knowing eyes. Was it *their* eyes? Was it *them*?

Shame crept upon her and paranoia followed. Who was watching her? Who?

*Was it them?*

Was this a sign? An omen? Was it to condone or condemn her?

Tears warmed her eyes but were quickly lost to the rain and wind. She didn't dare call out to the darkness. She was afraid someone would answer. And what that answer would be.

But why a balloon? What had that to do with her if this was some ghostly intervention? She looked up at it and only then did her sense allow her to notice how wrong it was. It was barely moving, just gently swaying in the terrible wind that was whipping her hair in every direction. How was that possible?

It unnerved her. Almost as much the carving on the railing. Both impossible.

She was offended by the sight of the balloon, looming over her like a red phantom. It was wrong. She hated it. Hastily, she pulled the string to undo the bow, wanting the wind to carry it far away from her. But once the string was loose, the balloon hung in the air, wavering only slightly in the storm. It also floated no higher despite being free of its tether, nor lower, like week-old balloons whose helium leaked out. Julie stared at the thing in abject horror. The utter wrongness of the balloon clogged up the rational workings of her mind and she could think of nothing more than fleeing.

Were they still here? Watching? Would they see her j

What she was about to do?

Would it really matter?

Julie couldn't take her eyes from the balloon. For some reason, she knew that if she were to look away then back, it would be right in front of her face. The thought of accidentally letting go of the bridge didn't sit right with her. *Does it really matter?* She had to choose it. And she did. Even with this thing urging her away, she had chosen it before and it

It

Bookworm.

A distinct shiver ran down her spine, unrelated to the sheets of rain pelting her. They had called her bookworm. They knew her.

Knew her.

Julie glanced around the bridge and into the darkened park, an unnatural calmness settling over her, brought on by the sheer amount of terror that rendered her into a zombie-like state. Her mind was only processing facts now. One: there was someone here. Two: that someone knew who she was. Three: they were no friend of hers. Four: there was something very wrong happening. Five: she did not want to stay here.

Escape was her goal now. Not from this life, just from this bridge, this place, this anomaly, this person in the shadows.

She edged sideways, away from the balloon as if it were a rabid animal. No sudden movements. Don't take your eyes off it. When she finally climbed back over the rail, Julie felt more vulnerable than before. Now there wasn't a barrier between them. *Them?* Her and it. And also the person watching from somewhere dark. Could have left, she hoped. *Might have stayed.*

I can't stay.

Her trek back through Bassey Park seemed triple in length, with frequent and frantic looks behind, left, right, in front, behind... Nothing sprang out at her. Nothing moved from what she could see in the pouring rain. No one spoke again. She considered going to the police, making up a story to mask her intentions because someone had to know

*About her ghosts?*

This was real.

*Her ghosts were real.*

No, that wasn't it. Wasn't them. It didn't feel right, not like *them*.

Julie wasn't able to convince herself to go to the station, instead stumbling back to West Broadway with a new desperate weight. But even as she did so, no sense of relief arose, but the feeling of being watched remained strong and she feared that she'd led something awful to her home.

4

Now, months later, the same dread filled her, as she stood seemingly alone on her street. With cold shaking hands, Julie undid the locks to her front door, casting another glance behind her, and down the sides of the streets. She pushed down the worry that what had been watching her was now doing so from inside her home and turned on the nearest lamp. Empty. Safe. It felt like a lie but it was one she so needed.

She hung her parka and rain boots by the hooks at the entryway to drip dry and shuffled cautiously into the living room. She wanted to

tell herself that she was being silly, walking through her house expecting a burglar of some kind but didn't. Because a burglar, she could deal with. A burglar she could understand. They wanted valuables and that was a simple human motivation. But what would someone want if they only crept close to stare, to poke fun into another's private moments?

*What would they want?*

For the first time in a long time, Julie Davies checked behind every closed door and curtain, keeping the lights on in the rooms as she left. It was like a child needing proof that a monster wasn't hiding in their closet. And even with the dark banished from her small home, it didn't seem like proof enough for her. Because she feared what she couldn't see.

She changed into dry, comfortable clothes, and blow-dried her hair, forcing herself into normalcy. Or trying to. She made herself a bowl of *Cambell's* condensed chicken noodle and curled up on the couch with a quilt just in time to catch the last of *Jeopardy*. She thought of Barbara momentarily and wondered if she'd be talking about what she learned the next day. Probably.

It wasn't working. Distracting herself.

Julie sighed. "Alright." When she was particularly stressed, she often spoke aloud, giving herself pep talks in the voices she did for the children. "What *exactly* is wrong right now...? I... remembered something awful, something dreadful... Okay. But, it's been *months* anyway and nothing bad has come of it since, right? So what harm can come from it now?"

Nothing.

*Anything.*

Julie shook her head. "There... could be... a *number* of reasons that that balloon didn't blow away..." It felt wrong acknowledging it aloud. "I'm not the most scientific person but, I'm *sure* there's a reasonable explanation. S-something with density?"

And as for the person who had been lurking by the bridge...

"A teenager, perhaps? Or... perhaps one of the poor homeless fellows who come off the trains..."

But she knew it was unlikely to be either. They called her bookworm, so they must know her from the library. And the voice... It's strange... but she couldn't quite remember the sound of the voice as if it had only been the wind talking and not a person.

And then, of course, the writing.

That was the most impossible of all.

Only three people could have known those words, herself included. And there was no way the others...

Julie flung the quilt off her, switched off the TV and went to set her empty bowl in the kitchen sink. She felt too restless. Her own reassurances seemed to be making things worse. Her reasoning fell apart at the seams when she thought too much about what had happened.

A dream. She wasn't in her right mind then. Who's to say she hadn't imagined it all?

*How could she have forgotten it all?*

Julie brushed her teeth, deciding to go to bed early. She braced one hand on the sink, scrutinizing her reflection. "Gour got cway see," she told herself, mouth full of toothpaste. You're not crazy. She spat out the foam, noticing a streak of pink in it. She examined her teeth, a line of blood ran between her canine and incisor, and rinsed it down the drain. The minty taste overpowered the tang of iron that surfaced when her tongue subconsciously brushed over the small cut.

With the light still on, she climbed into her bed, then out of bed again to check beneath it. There was nothing there save for a lone sock. She felt a mix of relief and resentment. Had there been a little goblin under the bed, at least she could know for sure that she wasn't imagining things.

Whether it was real or not, it behaved like a dream, surfacing later and leaving no traces in a shoddy memory. "Or *did* it leave something..?" Sure, the balloon had long disappeared; she'd seen the bridge empty tonight, and the mysterious person was as good as gone since their identity was hidden but the writing. If she went to the Kissing bridge and those words were there...

Julie made up her mind. Tomorrow before work, she'd check it out and see once and for all, if it had been only a terrible hallucination from a terrible point in her life.

In the back of her mind, she wasn't sure which was preferable. Having scared herself silly over nothing, or having a real tangible reason to be scared silly.

*How could she have forgotten?! Real or not. How?*

Julie shook her head, sinking lower into her covers. When her own mind was fighting against her, how could she win? How could she piece together what was wrong when she forgot such important things? What scared her most was not what she had remembered, although undeniably frightening, but what else could she have forgotten along with it. How long would it take to detect all the gaps in her memory, if there were more to be found?

She glanced at her bedside table, eyes not really seeing the bent and broken cover of a hardback bird-watching book. She'd read the title only once when she'd received it and placed it on her nightstand without clearly thinking. She hadn't touched or thought of it since, aside from lifting it to dust. She kept her bedside lamp on and slept; the sound of the rain hitting her window was a constant reminder that raging storm wasn't planning on leaving soon.



## 2. In Which Julie Gets A Warning

Let me know what you think so far! Predictions? :]

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### Chapter Two

#### In Which Julie Gets a Warning

1

Julie Davies didn't consider herself a brave person. *Nor a coward either.* She only acted bravely if she absolutely had to and that was precisely what she told herself that next morning over her cup of black coffee and cinnamon *Chex* cereal. But she didn't really *have* to be brave right away. There was no time constraint on checking the bridge. Why should such an unpleasant thing disrupt her life? *More than it had already.*

Did it really matter? *Yes.* It hadn't mattered in months. *Nearly a year.* Would it make a difference now?

It was already making a difference, she thought bitterly. Making her electric bill go up, to say the least.

She knew the nagging question of whether or not she were losing her mind would never leave her (and rightfully so), but having it answered would upheave her life just as much.

"If the writing is there, then I'll have to go about finding who had written it. Which... is near impossible, even in a town this small," she sighed. "And if it's not there..."

*And she hoped it were the case. Nothing. No evidence. Just to be forgotten again. How easy that would be.*

"If it's not... I could go see a therapist again. Maybe..." She shook her head. She hadn't seen a therapist since she was a teenager, and only regretted it slightly. Regular conversation was what she missed most, and having someone know her intimately. *Even if were their job as a trained professional.*

Julie drained the rest of her lukewarm coffee, pursing her lips as she swallowed. While she had been determined to get to the bottom of things last night, now... she wasn't so eager. Nervousness clawed at her stomach. *What if something's there?*

*What if*

*What if*

Well... whether there *are* or *aren't* those specific words carved into the rail, she'd be upset. Either way she couldn't win. So, that in mind, it would make more sense to look *after* work... So as to not ruin her day, of course.

*Not that she could enjoy her day if she had to work up to going back to that bridge.*

A sneaky part of her mind told her that by the time she got off, it'd be too dark for comfort to go and she'd put it off again. Then probably the next morning for the same reasons, then the next evening, then

She sighed.

"Maybe moving would solve everything, that bridge be damned." But even though she had meant it as a joke, the thought of avoiding her worries was incredibly enticing. She clicked her tongue. "No, I can't do that... I can't just sweep it all under the rug and expect not to trip..."

Julie was utterly at a loss. She'd created a relatively placid life for herself here in Derry, where her worries were never more than running out of half-and-half or muddying her good shoes. Her darker worries she kept in the past, or tried to, save for nights like the one where she found herself climbing over the Kissing Bridge. But those were few and far between. Very very few. *And never that bad.* Never as bad as that night.

It all came back to that night now. Her thoughts just kept cycling back to that damned bridge. And what had happened

*Hadn't happened*

And what *had* happened too.

She checked the time and realized she'd been stewing at the kitchen table ten minutes too long. Ah. Well, there goes her time for stopping at the bridge in the morning. She tried not feeling pleased. Although. She normally arrived quite early at the library... and ten minutes wouldn't put her out of her way...

Julie covered her mouth, thinking hard. She placed her dishes in the sink—she'd have to wash them tonight; they were starting to pile up—and paced from her refrigerator to the table then back.

Putting off going to the bridge would only make it worse, make it harder to go. She knew this. But still kept mulling over the idea that not going would be beneficial in some way.

"Buttons!" she exclaimed snapping her fingers. She'd popped a button on her favorite cardigan a few months ago and had been meaning to stop by the clothes shop to find a suitable replacement. She beamed at her convenient recollection. "That's that then."

Julie knew she was shooting herself in the foot. She wasn't going to go to that bridge until she was dragged tooth and nail. She wasn't a brave person unless she was absolutely forced to be.

Was this how the memory sank so low in her mind? Because she refused to properly acknowledge it?

*Or maybe she had and the truth had been too much to bear.*

She didn't want to think that. She'd like to entertain the thought that she could handle any truth thrown at her, no matter how strange or unsavory. She was a practical, rational woman and

And

She really should be leaving for work.

2

She was being foolish. She knew it but couldn't bring herself to stop.

Julie hung her coat in the staff room, a full fifteen minutes early after procuring her shiny replacement button from Rose's Secondhand Store and stopping to chat with Caleb in the main hall about how the morning drizzle was preferable over the other night's downpour. The houses on the lower parts of town were taking on water in their basements. No one wanted to mention the dreaded 'm' word... *Mold*.

The staff room was still and quiet like most of the library at this time, only the distant clack of shoes on the floor and the stuttering of the old Xerox machine down the hall. Julie stared at the worn armchairs and resisted their siren call for a few minutes it'd take for Mrs. Starrett to arrive and unlock the Children's Library. If she speed-walked, she could make it to the bridge and back. Only a few inconsequential minutes tardy if even that

No, no

She still had to pick out the next book to read to the children since they'd likely finish the one they'd been reading over the past weeks. With that thought, Julie headed down to the glass corridor to wait for Mrs. Starrett. Clouds blotted out most of the sky, promising rain to come. She frowned up at them, thankful that she'd been able to arrive at the library without being dripping wet.

The door opened behind her and she turned, expecting Mrs. Starrett to click-clack in, talking about *Final Jeopardy!* and how she might have won had she been on the show. But instead it was Mr. Kimble and his son, David.

"Sorry, I know we're a bit early." Mr. Kimble was all toothy smiles, not appearing very sorry, though slightly embarrassed.

Julie smiled politely. "Oh, it's no problem. There aren't any policies that forbid early birds."

"Are you sure?"

Well, she wasn't going to turn them out. It's a public library, after all. And David was a sweet child, only five or six.

"Of course." She knelt down to be on David's level. "Good morning,

David."

"Mornin', Miss Julie."

"Great. Thanks again," said Mr. Kimble, ruffling his son's hair. "See you later, buddy. You mind your manners, alright?"

"Mkay." And that was enough for Mr. Kimble to wave them off.

This was precisely what irked some of the staff.

This time of year, when summer was almost there, activity in the Children's Library doubled or tripled. There was a tad bit of controversy with parents simply dropping their children off and leaving them unattended as if the library were a daycare center, but it didn't bother Julie. She was always ready for a good distraction, and the children were a real joy in her life, even the rowdy ones. Barbara kept telling her that she'd be suited to be teacher, but exams and discipline muddled the appeal for Julie. She was keen on inspiring them, introducing them to new fantastic worlds in books and watching their creativity grow. She didn't really need anything more, really.

"Alright, David, would you like to help me pick out a book to read?"

"Are we gunna finish the one with, with the sand fairy?"

She nodded. "Of course, we are, but we'll need something to read after that's done. Won't we?"

3

Mrs. Starrett was pleased to see David, him being such a well-mannered and sweet boy, but had a few choice words about his parents which she quickly passed to Julie in a fierce whisper.

"He seemed apologetic enough," Julie told her which was, only partially, a lie. He hadn't seemed arrogant about it so that was enough for her. "There must be an emergency or something."

"They don't know any neighbors to watch him? Or family" Mrs. Starrett shook her head, stationing behind the main desk.

David left his small backpack by the reading circle, in his usual spot in the back.

"Now, you can look through the lower shelves here. Come and find me or Mrs. S. if you want to look at the books on the higher shelves. Okay?" Julie instructed.

"Where are you going, Miss Julie?"

"I have put away some things first. You could always color if you want to. Do you remember where we keep the paper and crayons?"

David nodded, absently pulling on his shirt. "Yes."

"Good." Satisfied that he wasn't going to do anything dangerous or damaging, Julie left him. She rolled one of the metal trolleys over to the main desk to collect the piles of returned books.

"Careful," Mrs. Starrett said, "The lights in R-S have been out."

Julie nodded. "Again? Thanks for the warning. I'll be sure not to race," she joked.

One of the rubber wheels of the trolley made a low squeak every few steps. Shelving had always been a peaceful task for her, sometimes when the day was slow and there was less to do, she'd take her time, reading each title, and if it were one of her favorites, checking to see who had checked it out last. There were quite a few names that she recognized by now as well as their taste in literature, though she lacked most of their faces. Gail Simmons liked high fantasies with dragons and witches. Tom Jackson liked mysteries and science fiction novels. Jordan Brown exclusively checked out *Star Trek* paperbacks. Libby Jones read all types of poetry. Benjamin Hanscom was partial to historical texts (he kept returning them to the Children's section by mistake) as well as the odd comic or two. Janetta Beck repeatedly checked out as many of Roald Dahl's books as possible; they had to have more titles sent over from another library. Betty Rips—

Julie paused, holding the worn copy of *A Wrinkle in Time* in her hands. She remembered Betty had been just starting the sequel when... She gulped. Holding the book felt like holding her hand. A

*ghost's hand.*

No

*She'd never finish the series now.*

Never

Never

There were a lot of nevers.

*Too many.*

Julie felt a weight in her heart, wordlessly scanning the row of 'L' surnames until she found the author's, L'Engle, and slid the book into its place.

*Don't think about it.*

Was that the answer to everything?

*Was that an answer?*

She continued returning the books, the squeak of the wheels beginning to bother her. It kept drawing her thoughts back to the present. To the ghost hands on so many of these books.

Now the task was hurried. Julie wanted to leave the empty aisles, wanted to go back to the lobby where a few more patrons had trickled in, where a few more children's voices mingled with David's and where the steady *stamp-stamp* of Barbara's work was louder. The library's heartbeat. *Stamp-stamp*. Her own was a bit faster.

She saved the books with R/S authors for last, of course, there being an abundance of Dr. Seuss needing to be put back. The aisle wasn't terribly dark, thanks to the lights from the other working fixtures and the drawn curtains that let the weak filtered sunlight through. Still, the aisle appeared hazy compared to the crisp brightness of the others, the tall shelves shadowing each other.

Julie left the cart, taking the stack of books in her arm, and strode

down the corridor. She deposited an Arthur Ransome, six of Dr. Seuss' books, Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty*, which only left Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. She came to the end of the aisle and crouched, balancing on her toes.

Stuart... Sullivan... Sutcliffe...S-w!

*Swift, swift*

S-w-a... S-w-e...

Julie turned around quickly, having to touch the bookcase to keep from falling over. It felt like

She paused.

It felt like someone was standing behind her. Like how some of the children do when they have a question but are afraid to interrupt. Only

It hadn't felt like

She let out a slow, shaky breath, berating her jumpiness, and turned back to the row of books.

S-w-e...S-w-i...

*Swift, swift*

Swift!

Julie ran her finger along the works then gently wedged out a space for *Gulliver's Travels* and slid it in carefully. Good. She braced her hands on her knees, ready to stand when the book began to *slowly...* slide... back... out... Julie gaped as the book moved on its own, not quite processing what she was seeing. It was impossible. The shelves in the Children's Library, unlike the upper, had backs to the bookcases, so someone pushing another book through the other side to move this one wasn't possible. It was

*It was moving on its own.*



The hardback tipped forward, Julie catching it just as it would fall to the ground. Moving slowly, cautiously, she bent down to look into the space left between books as if expecting a tiny culprit to be lurking there. Nothing she could

A book clattered to the floor in the middle of the aisle, making her gasp and lose her balance, falling onto her rear. Julie stared, unblinkingly, down the aisle at the seemingly innocuous book lying open and face down. The quiet sounds of the library continued, unaware of the strange things happening in this lone aisle.

Julie's mouth was dry. She hesitantly put *Gulliver's Travels* back in its place, ready for it to pop back out defiantly. But it didn't. She waited another moment and still nothing happened. She stood, walking towards the other book like approaching a rattlesnake. A few paces away, she could read the cover and her stomach knotted.

It was *A Wind in the Door*, the sequel to *A Wrinkle in Time*. The one that little Betty Ripsom hadn't finished...

*This wasn't the right aisle.*

Why of all the books

Why would Julie have to remember this one? Of all of the patrons

*Of all the children*

Why this?

*It shouldn't even be here!*

She considered leaving it. Ignoring its presence. Its significance.

*Just a book.*

It's only a book, she told herself. Don't give it more meaning than it should have.

No...

No more ignoring.

Her bravery was a façade. A nice little lie to herself to feel like she wasn't hiding behind anything that would shield her. She wanted to feel like the characters she read about, the ones that didn't shy away from adventure, no matter how dangerous or scary it may be. But when faced with the unknown, she would always turn away. Always.

But the unknown kept trying to meet her face. It wouldn't let her hide. Not anymore.

*Why?*

Julie subconsciously gripped the front of her blouse, running her thumb over the sequin design. Just a book, she told herself again. She was being silly, letting her fears project onto any random act. Books fall off shelves all the time.

Not like this.

*Wrong book, wrong shelf, wrong aisle.*

Books don't slide out of place all the time.

She could leave it. *Oh, stop.* Just leave it for someone else to find and pick up. *Since when was she afraid of books?* Her, a librarian?

*A bookworm.*

Julie's frown only deepened and she willed herself forward. But she was still rooted to the stop, unable to even shift her weight. Walk away from it then, she offered. A cheap way out, a way around. *Leave it.* How else would this stalemate end? Surely the book wouldn't leave or hop back onto the shelf. Surely. She almost hoped it would

Metal clanged behind her and she gasped. Felt like her skin was hit by a shockwave from inside and before she could recover

"Oh, sorry to startle you, Julie."

It was Caleb, setting up a ladder in the aisle. Julie's next breath felt cold.

"It's... fine," she said, "I-I just didn't see you."

"Well, I'm here to fix that," he smiled, motioning to the light fixture. "Oop. See you dropped something there." Caleb retrieved the book easily and held it out to her.

Julie hesitated slightly before politeness took over and she reached for the book, like someone reaching for a foul thing. She held it gingerly between two fingers, thanked him and finally looked it over. Just a book. There was nothing astonishing about it. She turned it over in her hands, a bit more confidently. She flipped through it, if only to convince herself that she'd wholly overreacted.

Worn cover. Slightly yellowed pages. A few creases where people had dog-eared the corners. The very familiar bookish smell that she so loved. Check-out card tucked safely in the back cover pocket.

She paused.

*Don't.*

Don't do it.

Don't look.

Don't.

But her fake bravery played out and slowly, she placed one finger on the check-out slip and moved it up and up and out of its sleeve. The last name on the slip, as she had known it would be, as was now confirmed in shining letters, was Betty Ripsom.

Her mouth fell into an 'o' of shock that morphed into one of sadness. Oh, why torture herself like this? Did looking really do anything? Did knowing what she had suspected do anything more than reopen up wounds. Wounds she hadn't even know she had had.

*What else didn't she know*

Julie pressed her lips together, gently touching the name as if she could reach out and comfort the lost girl. *Dead girl.* No, no, stop it. There hadn't been

She pulled away hastily, meaning to close the book and her thoughts,

but stopped. The shiny ink of Betty's name had smudged. Red. On the fingers, she saw the same red

It wasn't ink.

The name had looked black

It wasn't ink

It was

Julie flung the book away from her, rushing from the aisle, ignoring Caleb's worried cries. She ran to the first floor women's room which was, thankfully, empty. She couldn't imagine the fright she'd have given anyone inside when she burst through the door with a bloody hand. She turned the taps on full blast and stuck her

There was nothing on her fingers.

They hadn't even touched the rush of water and

There was no blood.

Julie licked her lips nervously. That couldn't be right. She had seen

*Clear as day!*

If she hadn't seen it, how could she have such a perverse reaction to

To

*To nothing?*

She blinked, turning off the taps and staring blankly. She *had* seen blood. She'd felt its sticky residue on her fingers and

"Miss Julie!"

Her eyes widened to saucers. That voice. That young high voice. It was coming

"Miss Julie!" it hissed again

From the drain

She looked around the bathroom just in case. No one.

"Can you read to me...? I can't see down here and I'd like to finish my book."

*Betty.*

Julie stared down the black hole at the bottom of the sink basin. Speechless.

"Miss Julie, don't go looking..." the voice cooed in a sing-song manner. "You *won't* like what you see..."

The bathroom door swung open and Julie jumped, tearing her slack-jawed gaze from the sink. It was staff member from the Old Building.

"Hello, Julie," she said brightly, oblivious to the young woman's horror. "Are you feeling alright? You look a bit peaky."

"I..." Julie glanced back down the drain. She couldn't reply.

### 3. In Which Julie Cries Out For God

Things start getting *real*... Hope you're enjoying it! And in case there was any uncertainty, all of the lack of punctuation and fragments are intentional. I'm trying to mirror how King wrote *It* :]

I'm *really* nervous about this chapter so any feedback is very appreciated!

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#### Chapter Three

#### In Which Julie Cries Out For God and Gets the Other

1

Routine carried her like a plastic bag caught up in a whirlwind. Aimless travel and motions. No set direction. No control. The children noticed. Julie had forgotten the voices she had used for the characters and had to be reminded every other page. She had to reassure Barbara twice that she felt alright and was fine to continue working. Being sent home was the worst thing for her. Yet at the same time, all she wanted was sleep. To shut off her mind and stop.

Julie sat on a bench outside the library. Calm puddles littered the ground and humidity hung in the air. She wrung her hands. The serenity of the outside couldn't quell her inner turmoil any more than her precious library.

Her lunch break was lunchless, too upset to have more than a few sips of water from the fountain. The water was lukewarm but enough to quench her dry mouth.

A new pressing question kept flitting through her mind.

*Was someone watching her?*

All this time?

*A ghost...?*

She considered asking Caleb if it were possible to throw a voice through the pipes. If someone spoke into one end, how far through the building could it travel? She wouldn't ask him. Something told her that wasn't the case.

Julie had only spoken to Betty Ripsom once and it had been a fleeting conversation. Nothing more than how she'd enjoyed *A Wrinkle in Time* and her thoughts on the main character. It was nice. But her voice

*Was it her voice?*

It was a little girl's voice, yes, but

Was she *really* able to match that voice to one that she'd only heard *once* over a year ago? Beyond a shadow of a doubt?

*No.*

But she was sure nevertheless. Just as she was sure that there had been blood on her fingers and the check-out card. She had worked up the courage to look at the book again which had then been returned to its spot on its proper shelf and found Betty Ripsom's name in dried black ink. Not smudged. *Not blood.*

But she had seen it.

*She had.*

"This must be what going crazy feels like," she murmured to herself, forgetting to keep it in her head. *No one was around anyhow.*

Whoever the voice belonged to wasn't the biggest problem. Hearing voices from the sink (or otherwise) *was*. It was another impossibility.

*Or a ghost.*

A ghost talking to her. *To her.* They knew who she was. They knew her. *Personally.*

*Bookworm.*

And a warning. They'd given her a warning. A warning!

Oh, what was happening to her? Julie shook her head, desperately. Don't go looking? For what? Answers? She won't like the answers? Well, she'd already deduced that!

Now, she felt as if she were being *forced* to go looking. Her options hung before her like two swaying nooses. Choose bravery or start running. Both options made her sick. Something so wrong was happening. To her. Around her. She hung her head. And this wrongness seemed to be taunting her. All of it coming together

*The warning was what she wanted*

Secretly

Not that she'd ever admit it herself.

*A reason to go back to ignoring*

But now, it was presented to her so mockingly that she had to reject it. This is what you want, Julie. Take it, Julie. Take the easy way out. You're good at pretending bad things didn't happen. She felt disgusted.

She couldn't

Wanted to

*God, how she wanted to!*

But couldn't.

Julie lifted her head, rubbing her neck subconsciously. She glanced around at the library's modest clock tower. She had the time... She could set things right. Or in motion. Julie bit her lip, stomach fluttering again with worry.

She stood from the bench, a pillar of doubt. Either go back inside. *Or go to the bridge.* She glanced back and forth at her options, stalling in the hopes that someone would call her away or a downpour would spring from the heavens. She hugged herself, gently chewing one of



her fingernails. Stay or go.

Like that one song, she thought, trying to laugh off her anxiety. *Wasn't working.*

This wasn't going to go away. These two choices would remain until she died or the bridge was demolished—and even then, the pressing need to dig through the rubble to find that piece of railing, to fit together the splinters to read, to find out, finally

Julie drew in a slow breath and the cool air tried to travel to her stomach. I won't rest until I go, she told herself, and she'd known it all along. How disappointed would she be in herself if she turned her back again and tried to hide. Would she spend the rest of her life living in fear of ghosts and voices from the sink? *Maybe.* She hoped not. *But maybe.* And if that were the case, she could at least tell those phantoms off, saying that they can keep their warnings and should clear out because they won't be getting any scares from her, thank you very much.

The silly mental image of chastising a ghoulish spirit made her feel a bit better as she began to walk away from the library, taking the same route as she had the night before. In the same fake way that she pretended to be brave. The feeling could crumble with the slightest breeze (and she knew this) but the small swell of pride that sat at her core kept her from second guessing herself this time.

## 2

Julie Davies marched down the avenue as if about to confront a cheating ex, each step making an angry wet *clack* on the cement. Her own warning to whatever waited for her at the bridge that she was coming and meant business. *She also hoped her fake outrage would shoo away whatever might be there.*

It was during school hours so most of Bassey Park was empty, save for a few older couples and the odd student or so skipping class. Even from a distance, she could see people on the Kissing Bridge. It was three teenagers, two boys and a girl, all dressed in studded leather and band tee-shirts. Oh well, said the other part of her but she pushed it back.

"I'm not spending *another day* living in fear," she said sternly. And although her intentions were good and right, her actions almost definitely ensured that her fate would be the opposite of what she meant to create and that she would spend many a day after today living in fear. A level of fear that she had never before experienced. And had she the power to erase one horrible mistake from her life, it would be to prevent herself from allowing her show of bravery and pride from leading her on a leash back onto the Kissing Bridge.

Her shoes made distinct sounds against the wood of the bridge. She ignored the glances from the teenagers as she walked, haunting her steps from near a year ago. When she reached about the middle of the bridge, she faced the spot where she had

*Almost*

No.

It's not about that, she thought, approaching the railing but not looking directly at it. She was still afraid. What a relief it would be to find something etched there that was *similar* to those words but not quite. It was a small thought that wouldn't blossom into hope. Julie finally looked down, scanning over the many carvings, reading some rather crude sayings with pursed lips. But she'd take those untactful curses over what she searched for. Anything over having to acknowledge the impossibility of...of...of

*"Don't forget to hold your breath, Julie! :o)"*

She blinked, reading it twice before stepping back. The more she stared, the more she was certain that that had been in the same place as the previous note. Or was she overreacting? There were plenty of Julies, that didn't mean it was to *her*. *At her. For her*. Hold your breath...? That was so relevant to that night, to to

*It looked the same!*

The raw scraped wood, as if it had been carved only moments ago. And even the writing! It was jagged and barely legible as if someone was writing with their non-dominant hand. Or a child just learning to write.

The smiley face taunted her. Definitely was drawn to taunt her.

They knew I'd come, she thought worriedly. Were they here?! Again? Watching her from afar?!

Julie spun around to the teenagers. "Excuse me!" she cried, rushing to them. "Was someone else just here? On the bridge? Did you see someone carve something into the railing here?!"

"Whoa, calm your tits, babe," the one boy laughed, looking over at his friends.

"Johnny, don't be an ass," the girl sighed. They looked like siblings, both with fluffed blonde hair and dark eyes.

"Please. It's very important," Julie implored. "If you know who wrote this message, you have to tell me!"

The girl shrugged at her friends, looking concerned. "Sorry, we didn't see anyone come by."

"But did you see anyone *leave*?" Julie went on, desperate for any information. "Or do you know anyone that comes here often? That could've wrote this?"

"Wrote what?" the other boy asked, absently rubbing his freshly pierced nipple through his *Twisted Sister* tee-shirt. "Someone wrote your number or something?"

Julie shook her head. "No, no, nothing like that. Here, look, do you at least recognize the handwriting?" she asked, leading them over to the rail. They reluctantly followed and she pointed out the message. "Oh, thank you. It's very distinct. I-I-I'm not sure if this person wrote anything else on the... What?"

The teenagers were snickering, the *Twisted Sister* boy biting his knuckle. He clapped her on the shoulder, walking away. "Nice," he laughed.

"What is it?" Julie sputtered. "I-I don't see what's funny about all this. Do you recognize the writing or not?"

The girl was just shaking her head, pulling her brother away by the sleeve of his leather jacket.

"Hey, hold on, Carla," he protested, trying to get another word in to Julie. "I'm hot for teacher, babe! I'm flattered but maybe another time?" he broke away laughing. "Call me!"

Julie stood, utterly confused at their reactions. All it took was a simple 'yes' or 'no'. What were they going on about? She looked back to the railing, to imprint the memory in her mind but froze.

It was gone.

Neither of the messages were there now and in their place was another, one that was old and aged and in different handwriting.

*"IM EAZY AND SLEAZY*

*IT AINT HARD TO PLEEZE ME"*

Her hand flew to her mouth as she gasped.

That hadn't been there!

*It hadn't!*

The message from before! She had seen it! The same handwriting and position

It

It

It

Julie Davies nervously glanced around the park, looking for someone to be watching her back. But there was no one she could see.

*How...?*

Her hand fell to her throat in worry. "I'm... I *must* be losing my mind..."

As she had predicted at the start of her morning, the trip to the Kissing Bridge had been enough to spoil her day. And then some.

She was downplaying what had occurred so as not to have a nervous breakdown at work. Well, *another* nervous breakdown.

The children proved less of a distraction than she'd have hoped and she ended up putting off finishing *The Five Children and It*, and had them all do S.S.R. Sustained Silent Reading. Julie only used that exercise when she needed a break, or when she was feeling sick.

If having a scare in the aisle and hearing a dead little girl's voice in a drain had been enough to throw her for a loop, certainly, the events of the bridge had done it.

The book she had seen fall on its own.

The voice she heard had been so clear, it was as if they were standing in the room with her.

But the message on the bridge

She had read it. Was positive of it.

*Just as before*

But then

It was gone.

*Not a trace.*

Not even a trace!

Her thoughts cycled rapidly between denial and disbelief and dismay. She was lightheaded, unable to progress her contemplation to anything meaningful.

*Not a trace*

*Not a trace*

But she was sure!

She was sure!

4

When Julie parted ways with Mrs. Starrett at the end of the day, she had no hesitation in taking her normal way home, steering clear of Bassey Park and the sight of that bridge. This time, she pointedly kept facing forward. The thought of looking back made her uneasy, as if the bridge would be looming over the buildings to spy on her.

There was a sliver of blue sky, holding off the total darkness, and she was thankful. Her heels smacked the pavement at a steady pace, ready to break into a full run if need be. There was no time for her to berate herself for being silly, for being paranoid of things that go bump in the night.

She all but slammed the door shut behind her, leaning her back against it for extra measure. She turned the locks and chain latch and sighed in relief. It was like a child running to a safe zone during tag to catch their breath.

Everything inside was too quiet. It was *always* too quiet, she reminded herself.

*Lights.* Get the lights.

Julie turned all of her lamps on in the living room and the bright kitchen light to start. Once the whole house was alight and she had chased away any shadowy hiding spots, Julie shrugged off her jacket and hung it by the door.

Maybe in the familiarity of her home, she could collect her thoughts and find some order in them? It was a fleeting hope that quickly led to the same repetitive cycle as before.

She sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. *That bridge. That damned bridge.* A headache was started to throb at her temples. She had skipped lunch. Needed to eat in order to think properly. She had to be at her full capacity if she wanted to make any sense of the mess that had become her life.

There was some of the chicken noodle soup left over from last night. Thank goodness, she thought, popping it in the microwave. She didn't have the energy for cooking a meal tonight.

She clicked on the TV to distract herself, to fill the room with some kind of sound so that she wasn't left with the silence and her own panicked thoughts. *Jeopardy!* again. Really, it wasn't her go to show and most of it went over her head, but it was calm, listening to Alex Trebek drone on about things that weren't dangerous or frightening.

By the time she'd drained the last of the soup, her headache had faded to a dull pressure. Ah, perhaps her hair being pulled up didn't help. Julie took out her hair tie and bobby pins, letting her hair fall past her shoulders. That felt better already.

One of the contestants was a jokester, laughing every opportunity. Steve Something. He seemed charming, even getting Julie to smile once in a while.

"'Entertaining at Home' for \$500."

"Since red wines produce *this*, the bottle should stand upright for one day before opening."

Someone buzzed in.

"Bill?"

"What is sediment."

"Sediment, that's correct."

Mm, that put Bill in the lead. And here she'd been routing for Steve... He could catch up still.

"Let's finish off 'Entertaining at Home' for \$400, please."

Trebek paused before reading the clue card. "Going *this* is something no host should admit to whilst a party is being held... A tough one."

Steve buzzed in. Yes.

"What is going insane?"

"Apparently not so tough, correct."

"Can I have 'You Can't Trust Yourself' for \$200?"

"Unlike amnesia, *these* are created when a person recalls that which never happened to them."

"What are... false memories?"

"Correct. Did you hear that, Julie? It's your call, Steve."

*What?*

"How about 'You Can't Trust Yourself' for \$600, please."

"Hearing voices, and seeing things that aren't there are both signs of what common—"

Julie turned off the TV, her shocked expression reflected back on the black screen. She sat stunned.

What was happening?

*What was happening to her*

What was happening to her

She covered her mouth, the other hand still gripping the remote control tightly.

5

This was too much.

Too much to take in. One thing after another.

Like the other night, she just wanted to put herself to bed, to turn off her mind as easily as the TV. She hoped for a revelation to come to her in her sleep. Anything to find the missing link in this madness.

Was she hallucinating? Somehow? Letting her worried mind play



tricks on her?

*No.*

It didn't feel like

*Could she even know if it were her own mind?*

Could she?

Clear her mind.

Start new.

And fresh

Start over.

*Tomorrow.*

Come at this with a clear mind tomorrow, she told herself.

6

Julie decided on a shower before bed in the hopes that the warm water would help her fall asleep more quickly. Fast forward to the morning. Skip the rest of this whole horrible day.

Her clothes on the bathroom floor, she glanced in the medicine cabinet mirror, waiting for the running water to get hot. She twisted her lips, leaning in closer to look at her face. The side of her nose was a little red. She hoped a pimple wasn't trying to form. Stress was always her skin's greatest enemy. That and these northern winters.

*Idle thoughts*

Steam started filling the room, signaling Julie to push aside the curtain and step in. It was an instant ecstasy, letting the water flush her skin pink and sooth the tension from her muscles. She waited a moment before grabbing her luffa and lathering up.

She closed her eyes, feeling the thick sudsy bubbles run down her stomach, her legs, and settle between her toes before being swept

down the drain. Enjoying the warmth spreading throughout her body, Julie worked the shampoo into a good foam, long tendrils of hair flopping at her neck as her hands moved. Her scalp was still sore from being in such a tight bun all day. She'd have to wear it not as high the next few days.

She leaned back into the stream of water, rinsing her hair. Her feet were submerged now, she noticed, keeping her eyes shut to avoid the shampoo from stinging them. The stopper must have fallen into the tub. Or there was a clog of hair. *Though she just used the plumbing snake to clean it last week.* Didn't matter, she'd do it again if need be.

Free of suds, she opened her eyes, alarmed at how quickly the water had risen in that short time. The tub was near full! Up to her calves! If it overflowed, it'd be such a task to mop up!

Julie quickly turned the knobs but found them both loose, spinning freely and uselessly. The water didn't stop, pouring from both the showerhead and down spout.

"Oh no," she groaned, squatting by the drain to see what the problem was.

She fished around with her fingers but couldn't find anything. The stopper hadn't fallen in. She stuck her little finger into the grate, hoping the clog of hair was close to the top. The finger brushed something foreign.

*That had to be it!*

The warm water was up to her chin as she kneeled and she craned her neck up and away from it. Her pinky stroked the object to the side of the drain so she could drag it up and out. When a little loop made it back through the grate, she pinched it and pulled. And pulled. And pulled until she freed it from the drain and stood quickly. Wrapped in her hand was a long flat string. White and ribbed and waxy.

Her brows met as she examined it. *A balloon string.*

She threw it away from her, letting it sink back under the water, and

only when it was out of sight, did she snap from her trance.

The water was impossibly high. Past the edge of the tub and up to her waist. Her shower curtain had flattened against the porcelain and the adjoining walls, creating a leak proof seal. Julie panicked, trying to peel the curtain away from the wall to release the water but it wouldn't budge or lift even an inch. No, no, no, no

It was sloshing at her chest now.

Her lungs were barely functioning in her panic.

The water. She couldn't

Her fingernails dug into the plastic, wanting to tear it open but it did no good. The shower curtain stretched as far as her fingers could poke, but showed no signs of ripping.

She couldn't

Not like this!

Julie frantically climbed onto the edge of the tub, bracing one hand behind her. If she could only climb over! Escape! Before the thought could fully form, the top of the shower curtain sprang free from the rod supporting it and began to close to the wall like a drawstring bag, sealing her inside the watery cocoon.

"No!"

Her cry was cut off as the last few inches of air slowly escaped. The message from the bridge flashed in her mind. *Don't forget to hold your breath.* But terror took the chance and she was left with half-empty lungs as the water submerged her. Julie struggled in vain against the curtain, her tears lost to the tepid waters.

*Not like this*

*Not like this*

*Please!*

It hadn't been even a minute and her lungs ached for breath. Her mind screamed against the underwater gargle of her slowing movements. Her body fought against her, lungs clenching, trying to expel her remaining breath in a roar of bubbles.

Take a breath, take a breath, her mind urged. Open your mouth! Take a breath!

*God!*

*Not like this!*

The bathroom light flickered once, twice, and suddenly a dark shadow stood beyond the curtain. What was left of Julie's sense riled at the sight of an intruder. This wasn't someone to save her, instinct told her that much. It drew closer. She began drifted towards it as well, against her wishes, until her body was pressed up against the thin plastic curtain. A shadowy hand reached towards her, tauntingly slow.

No, no, no!

A single finger tapped the plastic where her nose was and the entire thing collapsed like a dam breaking. Julie was thrown out in the massive outpouring of water. No time to brace her impact. Or make sense of what was happening. If she was being propelled into the waiting figure or not.

Pain sprang to her head as she drew in a ragged breath. She choked and sputtered and when her head began to clear, she whipped around, scanning the bathroom but found herself alone. Julie sat on the cold tile floor, tangled in the shower curtain, catching her breath in a daze.

Confusion swam through her scattered thoughts. Get up. Get out.

She stood shakily, bracing herself on the sink, and looked in the fogged mirror at her hazy reflection. Blood on her forehead. Must have hit her head during the fall. She stumbled to the door, grabbing her silk bathrobe to wrap around her shaking form. Get out. Get out. Get out! The doorknob wouldn't turn.

Her heart sank into fear.

A squeaking sound filled her ears and Julie turned just in time to see words appear on her foggy mirror as if an invisible hand were writing them. Despite her better judgment, she approached, wide-eyed, and read what had been smudged into the surface.

*"Are you ready to play? Yes or No"*

It was the same handwriting from the bridge.

"Oh, god," Julie whispered, running back to the door and attempting to force it open. It wouldn't budge.

*Bam!*

It was like someone had tried kicking in the door from the other side. Julie paused, backing away as another loud bang sounded, then again, and again, in quicker succession until a barrage of noise ricocheted off the bathroom walls. She held her ears tightly, squinting against the cacophony.

*She had to pick. Had to make it stop.*

Julie ran to the sink and with her finger, circled "No". Everything stopped. The silence left a ringing in her ears in the spaces between her shuddering breaths. Was that it? Was it over?

The mirror fogged over and the invisible hand moved again over the glass. A new message appeared:

*"Then you will be more fun to play with."*

Julie choked back a sob, hand resting over her heart.

*":o)"*

The light bulbs popped, causing Julie to scream, as she was plunged in darkness. Only the light seeping under the door bathed her feet and the wet tiles in a slanted yellow glow.

Her trembling hands went to her mouth, stifling her labored

breathing, afraid to make a sound. *Waiting.* Waiting for the shadowy figure to reappear. *To play with her?* Oh, god!

*God*

What was happening to her?

*And why*

What had she done to

The bathroom door clicked and creaked open suddenly, flooding the room with light. *Was this some trick?* Julie stared at the open invitation. Why was it letting her go? *Was it a trick?* Going to slam when she took a step

She took a step. And nothing. She ran. Bare feet sliding those few steps out of the bathroom until they hit plush carpet. Julie tore through her bedroom and down the hall, colliding hard with the front door. Shaking fingers fumbled with the locks and latch. Damn that chain latch! Her fingers wouldn't work properly in her

Out of the corner of her eye, Julie saw someone sitting on her couch.

She stopped with the latch, hesitantly turning her head to look. It was a woman sitting at the far end. White pants, floral shirt, long hair, the same shade of brown as Julie's. Her head faced the wall, shielding her face from view. A seatbelt jutted from the couch cushions, strapping her in as if she were in a car.

Julie reached out to her. "Mom...?" she croaked, approaching in quiet horror.

Her mother. Her mother. Oh, god. Her mother's ghost?

Julie stopped right in front of her, bending down to glimpse the woman whose likeness she could only recall in old photographs. She was trying to contact her, or protect her? All this time? Had she opened the bathroom door for her?

"Mom? Mommy, what's happening...?" Her voice shook. "Please help me..."

Her mother took a quivering breath, like it were the first in a long time. Still, she didn't look at Julie. "My precious little jewel..." she said gasping.

"Mom."

*To hear her voice again*

"I'm so proud..."

Tears welled in Julie's eyes. *God.*

"...you've got the same set of honkers as your mama."

"Wha..."

The woman grabbed Julie's breasts, squeezing twice, a loud truck horn sounding each time. The sound of an 18-wheeler blaring. Julie's mind rebelled at a distant memory.

She smacked the woman's hands away, falling back against the wall. It wasn't her mother! It looked like

And sounded just like

*But it wasn't*

It couldn't be!

Cackling at her reaction, the woman finally turned to her. Half of her face was a bloody gory mess, glass matted in her hair, one eye bulging free of its socket. Julie screamed at the sight of her mangled mother and ran to the door. It opened with no resistance.

A strangled cry escaped her. In the doorway stood her father, crying profusely, looking pale, his legs broken, bent at wrong angles. But the smile on his face

"Good news! I think I fixed my legs, darling," he said merrily, opening his arms to her. "Now come to daddy!"

There was no time to react as he stumbled forward, each step, his

bones cracking, and grabbed Julie by the shoulders. He held her swaying body in place and opened his mouth, a torrent of water erupting from his lips. It hit her directly in the face, pouring into her open mouth before she could shut it, and cascading down her front, her doused robe clinging to her body.

She thrashed and bucked but he pulled her closer so she couldn't escape the onslaught of water. Her nostrils were burning from the intrusion. She couldn't breathe, choking on her instincts to inhale. Her bare feet slipped in the growing puddle on the hardwood around them and she crashed to the floor between his legs. A large piece of femur was sticking out of her father's pant leg, dripping blood and marrow. She shrieked, crawling away.

Julie scrambled for the open door, falling over herself as her father crookedly turned. "Don't leave us! Not again, darling! We missed you!" he gurgled, water still pouring from his mouth.

She ran from the house, stumbling down the street. Asphalt scraping the pads of her feet as she ran next door.

"Help!" she cried, banging on their front door. "Please, help me!"

It was an elderly couple, she recalled. *They wouldn't get there in time!*

She ran to the next house, banging on their door just the same. "Please! It's Ju-Julie Davies! I need help! I need...I...I..."

*Hyperventilating.*

She was so lightheaded. From the the

Julie collapsed on their porch, trying to calm herself down, drinking in the night air, when a figure emerged from her house. Her mind flashed to the morbid images of her parents, expecting one of both of them. But it was neither. Instead, a a a

A clown.

Pale suit, painted face, auburn hair, wide grin.

Of all the things that made no sense to her, the appearance of this



character was the epitome. Her mind completely stopped, not even bothering to understand why a clown was here. And why he unsettled her just as much as her dead parents. *Worse*. How was he worse?

She stared slack-jawed as he waved at her, then held up a finger as if an idea had suddenly struck him. The clown comically shook one of his arms, bells jingling until a flash of bright red emerged from the ruffles at the end of his sleeve. He gingerly pulled out an already inflated balloon and it bobbed in the air beside him. *Red*.

*Red! Red!*

*Blood red!*

*Like the bridge!*

He released the balloon from his fingers and it began moving towards her. Unnaturally. *Like the bridge!*

*Oh god*

*It was him?*

*It was him!*

*It was him!*

"Don't you worry, bookworm! If you jump off that bridge *now*, you won't drown!" he called to her in a strangled fluttering pitch. "You'll float, sweet Julie! You'll float like your mommy and daddy!"

*It was him!*

*It was him!*

"Oh, god!" she shuddered, setting off running again.

It was like being trapped in a nightmare. A living nightmare!

Julie fell hard onto the lawn. Something had tripped her. She looked around to find the source. The balloon had caught up with her, its

string wrapped around her ankle. *Like the one from the shower drain.* The balloon held her leg high in the air, impossibly unaffected by her weight as if *she* were the one filled with helium. She worked at the knotted mess with trembling hands, hoping to slip her leg free but it seemed to only tighten. And then, to her horror, the balloon started dragging her backwards towards the clown who still stood by her door, shoulders bouncing with silent laughter.

*No!*

*God no!*

She clawed at the grass, digging up small chunks of earth with her nails but it did little to stop or slow the balloon. She was being pulled through the gates of Hell, located right on her very lawn. And on the doorstep, waiting, the Devil himself?

When she was at his feet, the balloon popped, its deed fulfilled, and her numb leg dropped uselessly to the ground. Julie rolled onto her back to face the clown looming over her. Petrified and exhausted, she couldn't move, couldn't speak. The clown crouched, looking like a wild animal, eyes focused like a wild animal. Eyes

*Those eyes*

God!

He crept over her, poised on his toes and fingers, sharp gaze locked onto her dread-stricken face. "Atta girl, Julie," he said quietly. "Just laaay still and be good." He patted her head condescendingly and she flinched away. Up close he was frighteningly real. In the back of her mind, she knew someone—something—like this wasn't meant to be seen up close. In detail. In horrible detail.

The streetlight shone behind him, casting through his hair like fire, and making the silvery fabric of his antique costume shimmer when he moved. His face was cast in shadow, but the deep red that lined his lips and curved upwards past his eyes were just as striking against the flaking white face paint. And those eyes.

Those awful piercing eyes!

## *Golden eyes!*

He'd been watching her drink in his appearance with glee, as if her mounting terror were laughable. The clown leaned in closer. Too close. Too close! His voice was sickly sweet and mocking. "Little Betty triiiied to warn you, but youu. *Just. Didn't. Listen.*" He clicked his tongue, disapprovingly.

Julie was frozen, shaking from the cold ground seeping into her back and the horrific reality craned over her.

"I had *planned* on saving you for later, but you just haaad to go looking for me, didn't you? You just couldn't resist," he chortled, the tittering sound cutting through her. "So, *noww*, we get to play together *face-to-face*, and *I* can have my tasty sweet Julie whenever I want."

What did that mean?

*She didn't want to know.*

It was nothing good.

A light turned on next door. Her neighbor! Julie went to scream when a gloved hand covered her mouth, muffling her cries.

"Ah, ah, ah... You don't want your neighbors to see you like *this*, in such a sorry state, *do you*, Julie?" he asked, voice thick and syrupy. Julie realized then, with a start, that her robe had untied during her scuffle with the balloon and left her chest and legs exposed. She tugged it closed, quickly, the wet fabric sticking to her easily. The thought of this *creature* hovering over her naked body was just just

"*Besides.*" The clown swallowed hard. When he spoke again, his teeth were elongated, filling his smile with jagged lines. "We're not done playing yet." She howled against his hand, frantically trying to bring her knees up to push him away. It did nothing. Like the balloon, he was just as immovable. Slowly, deliberately, he turned her head to the side, pinning it firmly to the ground with one large hand.

The neighbor's light went off and she started to cry. Hot breath

fanned over her neck. Her heart was trying to beat its way through her chest. Felt like someone's hand was manually squeezing it, forcing it to keep pumping. Too hard. It couldn't last. She couldn't

*She couldn't*

He was barely touching her. Just holding her down. *Breathing.* Breathing over her. Heavily. Erratically. Breathing fast and hard like her heart.

*She couldn't*

*She couldn't*

Julie started fading, her vision blurring dark at the edges and filling in. The outside world dropped away as unconsciousness took her, its last fleeting piece, the sound of low growling. *Too close.*

Too close.